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### The People Can Make Hard Budget Choices

We face hard choices. Almost every state has big budget problems. The Federal Government has dodged dealing with the coming entitlements crisis. Record deficits stretch far into the future even on the administrations optimistic projections. The president is now proposing a commission to deal with the ballooning budget deficits but there is widespread skepticism that political elites will have the will to tackle the problem.

When someone has to lose from any choice, policy making is paralyzed. Stinging sound bites arouse intense constituencies. They can spread virally, knocking off office holders in primaries, special elections and even general elections. It seems as if the people cannot be trusted to make hard choices and the policy makers are afraid to confront them.

One hope is to bring the people into the process--but in a way that represents everyone, under conditions where they can think about the issues constructively together. This is possible even under the most difficult circumstances. A recent project in Michigan, ground zero for budget crises, reveals a different public voice. A scientific sample of the entire state was brought late this fall by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to a single place, a hotel in Lansing, to deliberate about the state's nearly intractable budget difficulties. An almost perfect microcosm of the state in attitudes and demographics, the 314 weekend deliberators in "[Hard Times, Hard Choices](#)" grappled with difficult tradeoffs for a whole weekend.

By the end of their deliberations, the scientific sample endorsed bold moves of the sort politicians around the country hesitate about. In results of the Deliberative Poll they wanted to raise the very taxes that produce palpable pain (income and sales taxes) and they wanted to lower taxes whose effects they feel only indirectly, (taxes for business.). Support for increasing the income tax rose from 27% to 44% (with only 20% opposed by the end) and support for increasing the sales tax rose from 36 to 51% (with only 9% opposed by the end). And support for cutting income taxes for business, presumably to promote job creation, rose an astonishing 27 points from 40 to 67%. They also wanted to hold the line on essential services and were willing to pay for them with increased taxes. There was an increase from 50 to 55% in the percentage agreeing that the state government should spend more money on programs like education, health care and pensions even if this means increasing taxes.

The root of deliberation is weighing. These citizens were weighing hard choices by accepting remedies whose pain they knew only too well for the sake of greater benefits to the whole state. The people are not running for re-election but they have to live with the choices that are made. In other cases where this sort of Deliberative Poll has taken place, it has influenced policy by giving politicians cover to do the right thing--to adopt a policy that is not supported in sound bite polls but which the people endorse once they weigh the trade offs (see [When the People Speak](#)). Instead of relying on just a commission of elites, any commission to tackle the long term deficit issues should hear from the people before making recommendations. When consulted in a scientifically representative and thoughtful way the people can legitimate difficult choices. Their deliberations provide a road map to the arguments people will accept on due reflection when they have good information. With the hard choices we face, the public can be part of the solution rather than part of the problem.